

Dante's Inferno, translated by Robert Pinsky

CANTO XIII

The Wood of Suicides

Nessus had not yet reached the other side
When we moved forward into woods unmarked
By any path. The leaves not green, earth-hued;

The boughs not smooth, knotted and crooked-forked;
No fruit, but poisoned thorns. Of the wild beasts
Near Cecina and Corneto, that hate fields worked

By men with plough and harrow, none infests
Thickets that are as rough or dense as this.
Here the repellent Harpies make their nests,

Who drove the Trojans from the Strophades
With dire announcements of the coming woe.
They have broad wings, a human neck and face,

Clawed feet and swollen, feathered bellies; they caw
Their lamentations in the eerie trees.
Here the good master began, "Before you go

Farther, be aware that now you are in this,
The second ring, and so you shall be until
The horrible sand. Look well, for here one sees

Things which in words would be incredible."
On every side, I heard wailing voices grieve,
Yet I could not see anyone there to wail,

And so I stopped, bewildered. I believe
My guide believed that in my belief the voices
I heard from somewhere in among the grove

Came somehow from people who were in hiding places--
And therefore the master said, "If you remove
A little branch from any one of these pieces

Of foliage around us, the thoughts you have
Will also be broken off." I reached my hand
A little in front of me and twisted off

One shoot of a mighty thornbush--and it moaned,
"Why do you break me?" Then after it had grown

Darker with blood, it began again and mourned,

"Why have you torn me? Have you no pity, then?
Once we were men, now we are stumps of wood:
Your hand should show some mercy, though we had been

The souls of serpents." As flames spurt at one side
Of a green log oozing sap at the other end,
Hissing with escaping air--so that branch flowed

With words and blood at once, at which my hand
Released the tip; and I stood like one in dread.
"Had he been able to credit or comprehend

Before, O wounded spirit," my sage replied,
"What he had seen only inside my verses,
His hand would never have performed this deed

Against you. But the fact belief refuses
Compelled me, though it grieves me, thus to prompt him.
But tell him who you are, so that his praises

May make amends by freshening your fame
When he returns again to the world above,
As he is granted." Answered the broken stem:

"Your words have so much sweetness they contrive
To draw me out of silence; I am enticed
To talk a little while--may it not prove

Burdensome to you. I am he who possessed
Both keys to Frederick's heart--and I turned either,
Unlocking and locking with so soft a twist

I kept his secrets from almost any other.
To this, my glorious office, I stayed so true
I lost both sleep and life. The harlot that never

Takes its whore's eyes from Caesar's retinue--
The common fatal Vice of courts--inflamed
All minds against me; and they, inflamed so,

So inflamed Augustus that the honors I claimed
In gladness were converted into pain.
My mind, in its disdainful temper, assumed

Dying would be a way to escape disdain,
Making me treat my juster self unjustly.

I swear by this tree's freshest roots, again:

I never betrayed my lord, who was so worthy
Of honor. If you return to the world above,
Either of you, please comfort my memory

Still prostrate from the blow that Envy gave."
The poet waited a moment, then said to me,
"Since he is silent, don't waste the time you have,

But speak, and ask him what you wish." And I:
"You question him, and ask what you discern
Would satisfy me; I cannot because of pity

That fills my heart." Therefore my guide began,
"For this man freely to do the thing you say,
Imprisoned spirit, tell him if you can

And if it pleases you, in just what way
The soul is bound in knots like these; give word
Also, if any soul could be set free

From members such as these." It puffed air hard,
And soon that exhalation became a voice:
"You shall be answered briefly then," it uttered.

"When the fierce soul has quit the fleshly case
It tore itself from, Minos sends it down
To the seventh depth. It falls to this wooded place--

No chosen spot, but where fortune flings it in--
And there it sprouts like a grain of spelt, to shoot
Up to a sapling, then a wild plant: and then

The Harpies, feeding on the foliage, create
Pain, and an outlet for the pain as well.
We too shall come like the rest, each one to get

His cast-off body, but not for us to dwell
Within again: for justice must forbid
Having what one has robbed oneself of--still,

Here we shall drag them; and through the mournful wood
Our bodies will be hung, with every one
Fixed on the thornbush of its wounding shade."

We both were still attentive when it was done,
Thinking it might have more to say to us,

When an uproar surprised us--just as when

A hunter mindful of the wild boar and the chase
Suddenly hears the beasts and crashing brush.
There on our left came two at a desperate pace,

Naked, torn, so hard-pressed they seemed to crash
Headlong through every tangle the wood contained.
The one in front cried, "Come now, come in a rush,

O death!" The other shouted, falling behind:
"Your legs were not so nimble when you ran
At the jousting of the Toppo, Lano my friend!"

And then, perhaps because his breath began
To fail him, he stopped and hunched against a bush
As if to make himself and its branches one.

Behind them, eager as greyhounds off the leash,
Black bitches filled the woods, avid and quick.
They set their teeth on the one who stopped to crouch,

And tore his limbs apart; and then they took
The wretched members away. Then my escort
Led me by one hand to the bush--which spoke,

Grieving in vain through places where it was hurt
And bled: "Jacopo da Santo Andrea," it cried,
"What did you gain by shielding in me? What part

Had I in your sinful life?" My master said,
Having now reached the place, "And who were you,
Who through so many wounds exhale this blood

Mixed with sad words?" It answered, "O souls--you two
Who arrive to see this shameful havoc crush
My leaves and tear them from me--gather them now,

And bring them to the foot of this wretched bush.
In life I was of the city that chose to leave
Mars, her first patron, and take the Baptist: for which

The art of Mars will always make her grieve.
And if his semblance did not in part remain
Still at the Arno, she would not survive--

And later, when they pitched the city again
Over the ashes left by Attila, those

Striving to refound it would have worked in vain.

And I--I made my own house be my gallows."